DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 445 FL 013 818

AUTHOR Bartelt, H. Guillermo
TITLE Some Observations on Navajo English.
INSTITUTION Linguistic Research, Inc., Edmonton (Alberta).
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication; v14 n3 p377-385 1981

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bilingualism; *English; Language Variation; Linguistic Borrowing; *Navajo; *Nonstandard Dialects

ABSTRACT

Aspects of Navajo English are examined to illustrate how Native American English differs from standard English of native speakers. Phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of Navajo English are noted. Navajo English also differs from standard English in its approach to time frameworks and tenses. It is suggested that much of the idiosyncratic tense usage found in Navajo English is due to the use of English tenses for the expression of Navajo aspects and modes. Repetition is also a feature of Navajo English discourse that is used as a rhetorical device. Attempts have been made to describe Native American English varieties as autonomous linguistic systems which receive input from both standard English and Native American Languages at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse levels. (RW)

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Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication 14 (3) 1981.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON NAVAJO ENGLISH

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H. Guillermo Bartelt, Ph.D.
Prescott, Arizona

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ABSTRACT

American Indian language speakers have become largely bilingual in English over recent years. However, the English they speak is different in its structure and meaning from standard English of native speakers. Navajo English is used to illustrate the potentials for miscommunication.

The study of Native American English varieties has become part of the recent emergence of nonstandard dialects as a major focus in sociolinguistic research. The interest in the English speech patterns of Native Americans has also come from pedagogical circles. Since Native American children have not fared well in the traditional majority educational system, the study of Native American English has been, in part, an effort to build strategies for teaching standard English to Native Americans. It is the purpose of this article to outline some of the relevant pedagogical and linguistic perspectives of Native American English in general and Navajo English in particular.

One of the first descriptions of Navajo English and other Native American English varieties of the Southwest can be found in the contrastive analyses of Cook and Sharp (1966) and Cook (1973). Both papers are lists of predictable problems that English teachers can expect in teaching Navajo and other Native American students. Using speech and writing samples of Navajo grade school and high school students, Cook and Sharp outlined major phonological, morphological, and syntactic features which deviate from standard English. Although intended as a guide to teachers of Navajo children, the paper represents one of the first detailed descriptions of Navajo English as a variety of English. The paper concentrates on those features of Navajo English which can

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be explained on the basis of interference from Navajo.

Among the phonological characteristics, Cook and Sharp (1966: 22) mention the following areas:

(1) /iy/ becomes /i/ resulting in a confusion between pairs such as HIS and HE'S.

(2) /ey/ becomes /e/, as in /ple/ for PLAY.

(3) /e/ becomes /i/ when in word medial position, as in /hin/ for HEN.

(4) /e/ becomes /əɐ/ in some words such as SEVEN, BELL.

(5) /ow/ becomes /o/, as in OH or NO.

(6) Nasalization of vowels in Navajo is sometimes transferred to English when nasals follow vowels, as in SEEN–ING for SEEING.

(7) /p/ and /t/ become /b/ and /d/ in initial, medial and final word position, as in /bə biy/ for PUPPY and /do/ for TOE.

(8) /g/ becomes /g/ in word final position, as in /dag/ for DOG.

(9) Word final consonants are often reduced to glottal stops, as in /kla'/ for CLOCK.

(10) /Θ/ becomes /f/ in medial and final word position, as in BATHROOM and WITH.

(11) /m/ becomes /n/ in word final position, as in /mæn/ for MA'M.

(12) /o/ and /ð/ become /d/ in initial, medial, and final word position, as in THANK, THESE, and MOTHER.

(13) /v/ becomes /b/ or /f/ in word initial position and becomes /b/ in word final position, as in /berily/ or /ferily/ for VERY and /glɘb/ for GLOVE.

(14) /ǰ/ becomes unvoiced in words such as JUDGE.

(15) /r/ becomes /w/ or /l/, as in /wed/ or /led/ for RED.

(16) /l/ is produced the same in all phonetic environments resulting in a nonstandard pronunciation of words such as WELL.

(17) Consonant clusters /kl/ and /gl/ become /tl/ and /dl/ respectively.

(18) Consonant cluster /ks/ becomes /ts/.

(19) Consonant cluster /dz/ becomes unvoiced.

In addition, Cook and Sharp (1966: 25) point out that glottal stops in Navajo English may occur not only in the substitution of final consonants but also before vowels in word initial position. In Navajo no vowels can be found in word initial position. This frequency of glottal stops gives Navajo English its "choppy" quality.

Among the morphological and syntactic characteristics, Cook and Sharp (1966: 25) outline the following features:

(20) The noun plural and possessive –(E)S is omitted.

(21) Determiners with singular countable nouns are omitted.

(22) Singular and plural forms of demonstrative adjectives are confused.

(23) Feminine and masculine forms of pronouns are confused.

(24) 3rd person singular present tense –(E)S, past tense and past participle –(E)D and ING in progressive forms and verbals are often omitted partly for the phonological reason that word final consonants do not exist in Navajo.

(25) Present verb forms are substituted for past forms in sentences referring to past time.

(26) Subject verb agreement is often absent with auxiliaries BE, HAVE, DO.

(27) Navajo verbs incorporate pronouns representing the pronoun subject. This produces sentences in Navajo English such as THE DOG HE BARKS.

(28) Verbals, such as infinitives, gerunds, and participles are omitted or confused after other verb forms, as in WE BEGIN READ.

(29) Idiomatic usage of prepositions in English is occasionally omitted, as in GO SCHOOL.

(30) The conjunction AND is often placed at the beginning of sentences because it parallels a Navajo expression used in sentence initial position.

The only word order problem mentioned by Cook and Sharp (1966: 29) involves adverbs of indefinite time such as ALWAYS, NEVER, and so on. However, it is pointed out by Cook and Sharp that all non-native speakers of English have that characteristic.

Some features of Navajo English cannot be described in terms of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels. For example,

Cook (1973), in a study of the writings in English of a number of Southwestern Native American language backgrounds, found again a shifting between present and past forms of verbs in describing past time, as pointed out in (25). She comments that "this undoubtedly reflects that Southwestern American Indian languages have verb systems based on aspect rather than tense, as in English" (Cook 1973: 246). According to Cook, this shifting between past and present forms did not reveal any consistent patterns. However, in Bartelt (1980) it is claimed that when such shifting of tenses is examined beyond the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels, consistent patterns emerge at the discourse level. It is postulated in Bartelt (1980) that Navajo speakers find the native English patterns of tense and aspect usage inadequate for their underlying rhetorical motivations.

In English discourse, there is generally a stress on the element of time. According to Kluckhohn (1946: 205), in Navajo tense reflecting time is of less importance than the type of action, whether it is momentaneous, progressing, continuing, or customary. The Navajo aspects and modes differentiate time completed as against incompleted. The fact that Navajo speakers base their main verbal differentiations on aspects and modes may be a clue to the type of narrative technique (tense usage) in Navajo English discourse, according to Bartelt (1980).

The rhetorical language function of narrative in English is generally associated with the preterite or a semantically appropriate tense sequence. Shifting of tenses involves a "logically" defined relationship of one tense to another. In other words, one tense or aspect serves as a constraint for a following tense or aspect. In the native English speaker's mind, the time an action takes place depends on how it relates to the time of speaking. Events precede or succeed one another and are placed in their order of time. Tense switching constraints are frequently violated in Navajo English, as illustrated in the following narrative text:

> She never wanted to get married, because it was a lot of problems, for them to stay together. Beside the problem they had was my dad drink a lot. When he comes home

> drunk. He always starts fighting with my mother. Which we didn't like at all. He never comes back, when he goes to town. My dad stays out in town for a week or two weeks. We all get worried about him. Instead, he comes back all drunk which we don't like. And finally she couldn't put up with him. The reason why she gave up was because he was too mean to her. He didn't want my mother to spend time with us kids when we want something he doesn't buy it for us. The part that got mom really mad was when he didn't let her go to the store and get something to eat. He always hit us kids around for no reason. Probably we get on his nerves.

The overall temporal framework of this narrative (the fact that the narrator's parents separated) is past time. Particular examples that illustrate the reason for the separation, however, are presented in the present tense. The sentences WHEN HE COMES HOME DRUNK; HE ALWAYS STARTS FIGHTING; HE NEVER COMES BACK, WHEN HE GOES TO TOWN; and so on; represent habitual actions which occurred when the narrator's parents were not separated. It is postulated in Bartelt (1980: 65) that the present tense forms in this text are used to express or transfer the Navajo usitative mode. This mode denotes habituality in performing an act.

It is hypothesized in Bartelt (1980) that much of the idiosyncratic tense usage found in Navajo English is a result of the use of English tenses as a vehicle for the expression of Navajo aspects and modes. Specifically, the English present tense seems to be used for the transfer of the Navajo usitative mode, imperfective mode, and continuative aspect. The English progressive aspect (usually in some nonstandard form such as one with lack of auxiliaries) seems to operate as a vehicle for the expression of the Navajo progressive mode, optative mode, and repetitive aspect. The English past tense seems to be a facilitator for the Navajo perfective mode. 7

It must also be pointed out that at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, as well as discourse levels, Navajo English is often

characterized by occurrences of standard English usage. Viewing Navajo English as an autonomous linguistic system, it can be postulated that standard English as well as Navajo represent two major types of input into such an "interlanguage." This view has also been proposed for other varieties of Native American English such a Mohave English (Penfield 1976), Keresan English (Stout 1976), and Isletan English (Leap 1974). Whether the standard English or Native American language input dominates may depend on individual degrees of bilingualism.

Another discourse feature identified in Bartelt (1980) was the repetitive or redundant quality of Navajo English discourse. According to Navajo informants, redundancy is a rhetorical device in Navajo used to emphasize the expression of emotions such as grief, intellectual purposes such as persuasion, main ideas in stories, punchlines of jokes, and statements in eulogies. This rhetorical feature seems to be transferred to Navajo English. Consider the following text:

> To have a family is a great thing that could happen to a woman . . . She will also be loved and respected by her children when they all grow up and when she gets old. She won't be alone all the time. They respect her with great pride for raising them and she will not be neglected. She will not suffer loneliness . . . The woman will be in great need of someone who really loves her. She will be neglected by other people and will be left alone with things and hard work, that she can't do by herself. She will want somebody to turn to for help. The hard work will make her ill and put her in a bad health condition, if she does the hard work or if it worries her. She will be in great need of someone who loves her.

This Navajo speaker is attempting to persuade the decoder that marriage is a very vital part of human experience. By repeating key lexical items such as LOVE, RESPECT, NEGLECT, ALONE (LONELINESS), she rhetorically strengthens her argument for the institution of marriage and family. The data revealed that rhetorical redundancy occurred not only for the purpose of emphasizing persuasion but also for

emphasizing emotional concerns, clarifications and conventions of courtesy. Lexical items, phrases, sentences, and paraphrases are used to facilitate repetition in order to achieve redundancy.

In conclusion, much remains to be done in order to bridge the gaps in the fragmentary research on Navajo English as well as on other varieties of Native American English. Much description of Navajo English has come from contrastive analyses for pedagogical purposes. However, linguists have recently attempted to describe Navajo English and other Native American English varieties as autonomous linguistic systems which receive input from both standard English and the Native American languages at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, as well as discourse levels. More work is needed on other types of input into Native American English varieties, in order to contribute to the understanding of a bilingual community's ability to come to terms with the demands of two coexisting linguistic systems in an idiosyncratic manner.

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